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Sparks in the Willow

The Indians who plagued Fort Madison were a minority. Most of the Sauks, Foxes, and Ioways did not participate in the War of 1812. They threatened, they wavered, but in the end they were restlessly neutral.

Two small groups, however, were far from neutral. They were Black Hawk's band of British-inclined Sauks and Foxes and a band of tough and wild Winnebagoes who lived along the Rock River. Most of the bullet scars in the stockade at Fort Madison were put there by warriors from these two elements.

On August 24, 1812, an Indian came to the fort with a shocking story. He said that Fort Dearborn, on Lake Michigan, had fallen to the Potawatomi Indians on August 15. He had actually talked to some braves who had fought there, he said, and to prove their story they had shown him a piece of the garrison flag from Fort Dearborn.

The story was all too true. One by one the western forts were falling: Mackinac and Dearborn gone, Fort Wayne under pressure, and — though they did not know it yet at Fort Madison — Detroit was in British hands.

News of the Dearborn disaster was confirmed

on August 26 by a party of thirty Sauks who stopped to warn John Johnson and Thomas Hamilton. Hamilton, who was now in command, issued meat, flour, and eight gallons of whisky to the bearers of the news. Then he settled back to await the attack he felt sure was coming. An old brave had told Johnson in confidence that Fort Madison would be attacked within ten days or two weeks. Reinforcements had been sent for, but they would be some time in arriving; in the meanwhile there were eight men on sick report, and the season of fever and ague was due.

The biggest item of social news at the fort in early September was the fact that Emilie Vasquez was coming up from St. Louis on the next keelboat, bringing her little daughter Ophelia. At this time, Catherine Hamilton was probably the only white woman at the fort. Emilie's trip was untimely, considering the mood of the Indians, but she arrived safely on the evening of September 4 — safely but not secretly, for in the time it took the wallowing boat to make its way through the Rapids and reach the landing at the fort, its presence became known to the Indians. They were less interested in Emilie and Ophelia than in the seventeen men of the crew, for these men who jumped ashore and disappeared inside the fort meant greater firepower. Lieutenant Hamilton would be grateful for that added firepower.

Apparently no warning of an imminent attack had reached the fort. The sentinels saw nothing unusual, sensed no danger as Black Hawk and his hostile followers surrounded the post. They closed the main gate and the wicket gate, and cried "All's well" to one another, across the parade and from blockhouse to blockhouse, as the night wore on.

Early on the morning of September 5, the first man outside the stockade was Private John Cox. He was only twenty-five feet from the safety of the great log wall when he fell with a gunshot wound, and while a sentinel at a loophole fired vainly to protect him, a Winnebago cut away his scalp.

Black Hawk, who was concealed in the weeds by the path that led from the main gate to the river, had hoped that the entire company would march forth to drill in front of the fort — as he had heard they frequently did. The plan of the Indians was to rush the gate while the company was outside; but when no one appeared but Private Cox, there was nothing to do but shoot him down and begin a siege.

Firing from both sides continued all through the day. The maimed body of Private Cox lay where it had fallen, for Lieutenant Hamilton did not know the strength of the attackers and would permit no men from the fort to recover the body.

Stationed on the ridge behind the garrison, the

Indians commanded the height so thoroughly that no soldier could pass from one blockhouse to another without risking his life. Hamilton may have found himself wishing that Alpha Kingsley could be there to see the folly of locating a military post in the shadow of a ridge.

On the morning of September 6, Private Cox's body still lay outside the stockade. The Indians appeared in small groups on all sides. Those who had concealed themselves in the shelter of the river bank were content to fire leisurely at the loopholes. Others slaughtered the cattle, hogs, and poultry. At about four o'clock in the afternoon the attackers all gathered below the river bank and began to fire at the blockhouses and at the flagstaff. After firing about 400 shots (by Hamilton's estimate) they succeeded in severing the halliard so that the garrison flag came fluttering down. A general shout arose and Black Hawk later would boast that his own deadly aim had cut the halliard. "I took my rifle, and shot in two the cord by which they hoisted their flag."

After dark the Indians dragged away the body of Private Cox. When daylight came next morning, the soldiers peering through the loopholes saw the dead man's head and heart impaled upon sticks thrust into the mud along the shore.

Gunfire continued all day September 7. The boats at the landing were burned and a house belonging to Denis Julien was on fire. Black Hawk's

warriors were now trying to burn the fort with flaming arrows, but the soldiers had devised "squirts" or syringes from some old musket barrels, and with these they kept the shingles too wet to ignite. One man had been wounded in the face but there were no more fatalities. No count of dead Indians was made.

At sundown the house of trader Archibald McNabb was burning, and Hamilton had begun to worry about the factory building. If that substantial structure should burn when the wind was right, the whole fort would go with it.

Hamilton's decision to fire the factory himself while the wind was calm could not have been made casually. He had watched his soldiers erect the building log by log, and he knew how important a trading house was to the friendly Indians. Still, he must consider the safety of his command, including his own wife and children.

He sent a man with a stick of port-fire, from the ordnance stores, to set the building afire during a lull in the siege. It burned with a great flame, sending sparks into the willows along the river and filling the air with the unbearable stench of scorched fur as the bales of pelts were consumed. Much of Johnson's merchandise was stored in the lower floor of blockhouse No. 3 and was not lost, but the building itself fell to coals and rubble, and with it fell one more attempt of the American government to subdue the red men of the Upper

Mississippi Valley and draw them away from British influence.

While the factory burned, some of the Indians fortified a stable near the fort. When they began to fire from this redoubt in mid-morning, September 8, Lieutenant Vasquez had his first opportunity to show Emilie what a crack artillerist he was. Except for occasional drill and the daily firing of the morning gun at reveille, with a blank charge, the men had had little chance to test their skill as matrosses [artillerists] since the establishment of the fort. Even in the spring of 1809, when they had fired a round of grape to impress Black Hawk, their target had merely been the broad river.

There probably was a six-pounder in each of the three main blockhouses, for Kingsley had brought one along when he began the fort and two more had been sent up during the scare in 1809. Vasquez took command of one of these pieces as soon as the Indians were discovered in the stable, and fired two rounds. His accuracy, said the *Missouri Gazette* in St. Louis, "soon made their yellow jackets fly." But attempts to burn the fort continued all through the day.

By September 9 the Indians had expended their ammunition and left, but not before they had won a victory and put Hamilton in a mood to evacuate the fort. The factory was gone, and it was the main reason for the existence of the post. Already John Johnson was packing his goods, intent

on getting down to St. Louis as fast as possible. The cattle were dead, so there was no way to haul wood; the hay was burned and hence there was "no forage even if we had cattle," Hamilton reported. He told his superiors that he would evacuate by November 15 if no steps were taken to render his position more secure.

A relief party of nineteen men was already on the way, commanded by Horatio Stark, who had been on duty at Belle Fontaine all summer. Stark was still nominally in command of the Fort Madison company, with Hamilton substituting while Stark recovered from an illness. His relief party (sent before the attack) was too late to help defend the post but it did arrive in time to allay Hamilton's fears that he must evacuate.

Although the urgent attention of the War Department was turned to danger spots in the East, and although there was talk of retrenching in the West, Fort Madison still had a year to live.

The more Lieutenant Hamilton thought about it, the more he believed the western frontier could be saved. In October he wrote the Secretary of War:

Do not consider it impertinent in a young officer by suggesting the following particulars to be taken into view —

It is said the Michilimackinac, Chikago and Detroit has been arrested from our Countrymen. The ill consequences resulting from these misfortunes will readily occur to

every wellwisher of his government. — I therefore offer the following plan of operation. . . . Forward an efficient force to regain Detroit, and capture Maulden. Proceed to Michilimackinac regain that post and take the little post of St. Joseph, which is in its neighborhood. The advantages which will accrue to the frontier of Louisiana, Illinois and Indiana are inconceivable. The Indians who are now attached to the British would not only loose their confidence in them, but would deter others. . . . send two Companies to Forts Mason & Madison, and establish Posts at Prairie du Chien, Peoria, & if possible at Green Bay — These Posts with those already named . . . would require no more than one thousand men, which will be but one regiment. . . . These may be considered as chimerical Ideas of mine, but I would if necessary pledge my life for the existance of the efficiency of such a plan.

Eventually some of these steps would be taken, although Hamilton's letter probably had little influence. Certainly the Secretary had no intention of reinforcing Fort Madison; instead, he spoke of abandoning it. He told Colonel Bissell at Fort Belle Fontaine to confer with Governor Benjamin Howard of Missouri Territory, and, if Howard concurred, the troops should be withdrawn from Fort Madison and Fort Osage.

But the mails were poor that autumn, and Bissell did not receive the Secretary's letter of October 7 until after Christmas. By then the Mississippi and Missouri were closed by ice and it was impossible to evacuate either Madison or Osage. Bissell thought, however, that they should both be given up in the spring and that new garrisons

should be established on the Illinois and Mississippi. The new posts, he wrote, should be built "in the most favorable bends of the river, where they nearest intersect, and where good sites may be found, the one on the Illinois, at or near the Peoria, and the other on the Mississippi below Stoney river [Rock River], and perhaps nearly as low down as the rapids, and that those posts be garrisoned with Field Officers. . . ."

Here the matter rested until spring. When Bissell finally got an opinion from Governor Howard, who had been away during the winter, it ran counter to Bissell's views. Howard wanted Fort Madison retained.

. . . I never considered it a happy selection of Scite for a Garrison either as it respects the Defence of the Post itself, or its efficiency in affording Protection to the Frontier, had my Opinion been taken before we were in Hostility with the Indians, it certainly would have been in favor of its evacuation, but from a variety of considerations, arising from existing circumstances, I deem the abandonment of it unadvisable, were it to take place at this time the measure could be employed with great Dexterity among the Indians by B.[ritish] Agents as evidence of our inability to maintain it, and would embolden those who are now hostile, and possibly decide the wavering to take part against us. . . ."

At about the same time, the Secretary of War clinched the matter by writing to William Clark that the fort should be definitely continued.

What made the planners feel sure that Fort

Madison could survive was a scheme to transplant the confederated tribes of Sauk and Fox Indians below the fort, where, if they could be isolated from the warlike Winnebagoes and undecided Potawatomis, they might cause less trouble. The project dragged because the government had no large team of knowledgeable men to send among the Indians. Finally, the assignment fell to dependable Nicholas Boilvin and a Fox half-breed named Maurice Blondeau, who was influential among the tribes. These two men set out early in 1813 to persuade the Indians to move their villages downriver. Their job was made harder by an untimely bit of violence; down at Fort Mason, at the mouth of the Salt River, some militiamen had killed Quashquame's brother and sent a wave of suspicion through the ranks of Sauk and Fox warriors. But by the beginning of summer all the friendly members of these nations were living near the mouth of the Des Moines, including about 1,000 fighting men who could have caused much trouble had they decided to fight for the British. Blondeau estimated that 120 men still lived at the old village of Saukenuk on the Rock River, of which 100 under Black Hawk were avowedly pro-British and 20 were wavering in allegiance.

The problem now was to keep the relocated Indians happy, and the best way to do it was to give them a blacksmith and a factory. Johnson

was now open for business in St. Louis, with nobody in particular to trade with. By autumn a second relocation of the tribes had been accomplished for the purpose of getting them further away from the hostile Indians, and to a place where Johnson could conveniently establish another factory. The place was on the Missouri, at the mouth of Little Moniteau Creek.

This migration did not change Thomas Hamilton's problem very much. His assignment was the same: watch out for those renegades on Rock River, and for the Winnebagoes, and for stray Kickapoos or Potawatomis, too. Any warrior now near the fort might be looking for trouble.

In the summer of 1813, Lieutenant Hamilton decided to build a small blockhouse by the ravine to discourage Indians from gathering there. On July 8, when the structure was still no more than an underpinning of stone with a few courses of logs laid upon it, the ravine brought death to two more soldiers. A party of Winnebagoes and Sauks opened fire on a fatigue party chopping logs. One man was killed instantly and another died later; a third man was wounded. The soldiers were not identified in the *Missouri Gazette*, which ran an account of the incident, but Hamilton's company book carries the notation "shot by Indians July 8, 1813" after the name of Private John Minard. He was a thirty-six year old farmer from New London, Connecticut.

Another week of hasty construction followed, and when the men quit work on the afternoon of July 15 the blockhouse was chinked and plastered as high as a man's head. Above that point the raw, fresh-hewn logs were fitted loosely together and the cracks let sunlight through. But Hamilton felt it was Indian-proof if the sentinels would only keep the door barred. At guard-mounting he assigned a corporal and three privates to the blockhouse and ordered them not to open the door for any reason until relieved by the new guard.

But the men he assigned were volunteer Rangers, new to the fort and, as Hamilton later wrote, "not accustomed to obey such injunctions."

At 6:30 A.M. the guards were seen sitting in the doorway of the blockhouse, facing the fort. One of them was walking between the blockhouse and the fort when he might more logically have been on the other side, keeping an eye on the ravine.

At 7:00 A.M. an Indian crept to the blockhouse from the west, where he could not be seen by the men on duty. He thrust his musket through a loophole and fired on the men in the doorway. They leaped to their feet and scrambled to get inside, and just as they barred the door another Indian sprang upon it and tried to force it open with his feet. He was shot, either from the blockhouse or the fort.

Inside the fort, a gun crew raced to the south-

west blockhouse and trained a six-pounder on the group of Indians now frantically trying to get at the four men inside.

While some of the attackers began to dig at the stone underpinning, others jumped high in the air and attempted to shoot arrows between the unchinked logs. But the angle was wrong and the arrows clattered into the room without injuring any of the men. However, one Indian managed to kill perhaps two men by thrusting a spear through a crack on the south side of the blockhouse. The other two men seem to have been mortally injured in the first flurry of fighting before the door was barred.

A burst from the six-pounder severed one Indian's arm above the elbow and broke another's at the wrist, and the ravine was soon cleared. But already the underpinnings of the blockhouse had been torn open and two of the dead soldiers pulled outside and mangled.

Now the Indians took positions on the bluff behind the fort and continued firing. From this point they harrassed a party that went out in mid-afternoon to try to bring in the dead. No one was injured but the party fell back without the four bodies. The firing stopped before nightfall.

Two days later, Hamilton wrote a bitter and discouraging letter to Colonel Bissell at Belle Fontaine. He was ready to give up.

A man is positively in danger of losing his life to be

seen outside of the garrison. They can actually . . . arrange for the execution of any plan they choose without being discovered. Of course they can come down upon us like a flash of lightning — to be ready to meet which, we are harnessed up day and night. . . . We must have wood, and I shall remain entirely inside the fort until I hear from you, even if in so doing I should be compelled to burn some of the petty mouldings in some of the fine buildings. . . . If I do not hear from you by the 20th of August and the Indians continue to harass me in the manner they appear determined to do, I do not know but I will take the responsibility on myself, that is if they will permit me to go away. It is impossible for us to do duty long in the manner that I have adopted.

He was allowing a full month for Bissell's reply. His message would have to be carried downriver by boat or on horseback; Bissell would have to confer with Benjamin Howard, who was now General Howard, commanding the western end of the military district; then Bissell would have to send his reply up the river by the same tedious route.

From here the historical record becomes almost blank. Sometime between late August and mid-November, 1813, Fort Madison was abandoned and burned. In the surviving papers of Bissell and Howard, and in the records of the War Department, no trace of a report on the evacuation has been located. It is little comfort to this writer to assume that such a document still exists, and that some day, in the great vault called the National Archives, it will come to light.

As late as 1897 the files of the War Department apparently contained some record of Fort Madison's final days. An anonymous clerk in the Department prepared a brief paper in that year, published in the *Annals of Iowa*, sketching the history of the fort. It contained this passage:

During the night of the 3d of September, a trench was dug from the southeast block-house to the river. The boats belonging to the garrison had already been secured, and to them was hurriedly conveyed the remainder of the provisions and the most valuable of the movable property. Then the garrison moved stealthily on their hands and knees along the trench, and gained the boats; the order was given to apply the torch, and although the savages were encamped in force within gunshot of the fort, so secretly and cautiously had the movements been made that Hamilton and his men were far away on the bosom of the Mississippi, and the fort completely wrapped in flames, before the enemy was aware of their departure.

The *Missouri Gazette*, which had followed the affairs of Fort Madison faithfully for five years, did not mention the evacuation until November 20. It then carried two sentences about the event, mentioning that one reason for the abandonment was the failure of the civilian contractor to supply rations. The date of the evacuation was not given.

Though the author of the 1897 article in the *Annals* was clearly working from original documents, and though his report is basically accurate in other respects, there is some reason to doubt his statement that the fort was abandoned on Septem-

ber 3. If so, the boats of the garrison could easily have reached St. Louis by September 7; yet on September 11 the *Gazette* ran a letter about Fort Madison affairs and gave no hint that word of the abandonment had reached the editor.

The burning of the fort was but a small loss to the war machine. It could not have alarmed a nation that was soon to hear of Captain Perry's success on Lake Erie and the reoccupation of Detroit. And the war that was finished for Fort Madison was not finished for its men, who moved on to new duties. William Henry Harrison had yet to defeat the British and kill Tecumseh at the Thames. Andrew Jackson still must whip the Creeks at Talladega and Horseshoe Bend. The Atlantic waters still must churn with the frigates, brigs, and sloops of opposing navies. The British were about to take Fort Niagara, burn Buffalo and Black Rock, and later destroy the Capitol itself in Washington. Ahead were such battles as Lundy's Lane, Fort Erie, and Plattsburg. Francis Scott Key had yet to watch the bombs bursting in air at Fort McHenry.

But at Fort Madison, one episode and one great effort had ended.

DONALD JACKSON